

Literary Positivism? Scientific Theories and Methods in the Work of Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) and Wilhelm Scherer (1841-1886)

WOLFGANG KALTENBRUNNER*

Introduction

This paper compares the work of two men, who during their lifetime were widely considered the most competent and knowledgeable individuals in literary matters in their countries. However, only a couple of decades after their death, their reputation had declined, and their writings were dismissed by many people as the most naïvely misconstrued approaches to literature one could possibly imagine. The individuals in question are the French literary critic/scholar Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) and the Austro-German philologist Wilhelm Scherer (1841-1886). Note that literary research was also at that time not a field in which results were rapidly outdated. Sainte-Beuve's and Scherer's lot was much worse: in the judgement of later generations, both men were found guilty of the cardinal sin of 'literary positivism'.¹ Sainte-Beuve and Scherer wrote in a period in which the modern disciplinary boundaries between the humanities and the natural sciences were already in place, but still penetrable. Their work contains prominent examples for the migration of epistemological, theoretical, and methodical concepts between these gradually differentiating societal domains. Sainte-Beuve and Scherer therefore came to figure as emblematic of a specifically modern approach to the study of literary texts.

In this paper, however, I will critically re-examine the seemingly sharp contours of 'literary positivism'. In spite of being assigned this common label, the actual approaches of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer are quite different as regards research goals and underlying theory and methodology. Both scholars were principally interested in deterministic biographism, i.e. the attempt to explain the personality of a writer as expressed in his writings by recourse to determining biographical factors. Next to that, however, it was Sainte-Beuve's foremost research goal to use these individual biographical accounts to build up a large database of different psychological character types in order to inaugurate a future science of morals. Scherer, on the other hand, was mainly interested elaborating inductive hypotheses on the causal determination of individual life and literary history by various social and physiological factors. I will show that these differences can largely be explained by the different scientific knowledge sources these scholars drew on, and by the quite opposite political circumstances to which they reacted through their work.

* Erasmus University Rotterdam, FSW, Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands. *Acknowledgements:* I am grateful to Ernst Homburg and the editors of *Studium* for vital feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Cf. E. Hennequin, *La critique scientifique* (Paris 1890); P. Salm, *Three modes of criticism: the literary theories of Scherer, Walzel and Staiger* (Cleveland 1968); H.-H. Müller & T. Kindt, 'Dilthey gegen Scherer. Geistesgeschichte contra Positivismus. Zur Revision eines wissenschaftshistorischen Stereotyps', *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 74 (2000) 685-709.

Literary Positivism?



Left: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869). Engraving, c.1860. Right: Wilhelm Scherer (1841-1886). From: W. Scherer, *Geschichte der deutschen Litteratur* (Berlin 1899).

Both writers are among the most influential literary intellectuals of their time and country. Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve belonged to the first generation of ‘literary workers’ who managed to earn a living as journalists for the newly emerged mass media from circa 1830. Writing mostly for moderate leftist journals, he acquired fame for his profound, yet readable criticism that attempted to understand literary works by reconstructing the authors’ biography and social environment. The list of Sainte-Beuve’s declared enemies is long and impressive, encompassing individuals such as Honoré de Balzac, the brothers Goncourt, and Friedrich Nietzsche. It is Marcel Proust, however, who stands out as the one who had the most decisive influence on the reception of the critic by later generations. In the famous essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, posthumously published in 1954, Proust argues that Sainte-Beuve’s biographical approach fails to distinguish between the creative identity of an author, and his actual identity in real life.² By explaining literary works in a deterministic way on the basis of empirical facts of biography, the critic reduces also their artistic content. Therefore it is not surprising, as Sainte-Beuve’s opponents agree, that he failed to acknowledge the greatness of some of the most important writers of his time, such as Balzac himself, Stendhal, and Baudelaire. Proust’s own *À la recherche du temps perdu*, one of the most influential works of literary modernity, lends itself to be read as a decidedly anti-positivistic and anti-modernistic reflection on epistemology. Sainte-Beuve was thoroughly debunked by posterity, also on the academic level.³ His ‘positivistic’ approach was the theoretical antithesis to French post-war structuralism as represented for example by Roland Barthes. Structuralism considers the literary work of art as an autonomous artificial construct that contains the key to its various interpretations

2 M. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Paris 1954).

3 A. Barsch, ‘Biologie, Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert: Wilhelm Scherer als Beispiel für eine Orientierung an den Naturwissenschaften’, in: A. Barsch & P.M. Heil (eds.), *Menschenbilder zur Pluralisierung der Vorstellung von der menschlichen Natur (1850-1914)* (Frankfurt am Main. 2000) 237-259, especially 255.

in itself. Trying to shed light on its stylistic or intellectual content by way of biographical contextualization amounts to an outright category mistake.

Wilhelm Scherer entered the academic scene in the late 1850s, when the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Prussian kingdom were competing for political hegemony over the German states. Scherer initially supported Bismarck and his project of establishing the young German empire as one of the leading industrial superpowers. His research deduced an ideal national identity from linguistic and literary history, and offered 'scientific' means to cultivate this identity in the future. To strengthen the role of German Studies as an exponent of ideology, Scherer methodologically aligned his literary research to the model of the hugely successful empirical inductive sciences. Scherer's achievements began to be discredited in the wake of the *Geistesgeschichtliche Wende* that Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert initiated and successfully popularized in the late 1880s.⁴ Representatives of Diltheyian *Geistesgeschichte* assumed that true literary masterpieces were the ultimately inexplicable product of genius, and that poets in general were exceptional individuals that could not be measured by general anthropological standards. The task of the literary scholar in their view consisted in re-imagining the process of aesthetic creation in a quasi-religious way. Scherer's work in contrast came to be considered as emblematic of the failed notion to apply scientific methods to an object of study that could not, and neither should be, approached from a rational vantage point. While his research model was highly influential during his lifetime and among the immediately succeeding generation of scholars, it had by the beginning of the First World War been generally dismissed as overly rationalistic.

Two 'positivistic' approaches to literature?

In this chapter I will outline the work of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer in terms of main research interests and methods. The comparison will reveal some similarities between their approaches, but it will also make explicit how inappropriate it is to lump them together as 'literary positivists'.

Both writers professed literary criticism in the narrow sense, i.e. the judgment of artistic achievements on the basis of more or less subjective criteria. Reminiscent of the normative classicist tradition of *ancien régime* criticism, but with more respect and with a greater awareness of his own subjectivity, Sainte-Beuve generally intends his critical essays to provide useful feedback to the writer. The critic in his perception should not merely exalt or condemn, but take responsibility for cultivating literature and public taste. While Sainte-Beuve was a journalistic literary critic by profession from the age of 25, Scherer turned to criticism only later in his life, and for a rather specific socio-political purpose. His first essays on renowned Germanophone writers such as Gottfried Keller and Gustav Freytag were published in the early 1870s.⁵ Scherer ascribes literature and literary criticism the educative function of presenting role models for different domains and classes of social life. Literature should exert a politically conciliatory effect and thus contribute to the social coherence of the German empire. Scherer usually neglects writers' concern with social questions or oppositional political opinions.

Furthermore, following a strong pan-European trend towards the deterministic explanation of individual and historical developments in the nineteenth century, both Sainte-Beuve and Scherer share an interest in what could be termed deterministic biography. They do not

4 J. Sternsdorff, *Wissenschaftskonstitution und Reichsgründung* (Frankfurt am Main 1979) 12.

5 W. Höppner, *Das 'Erbte, Erlebte und Erlernte' im Werk Wilhelm Scherers* (Cologne etc. 1993) 151.

name the same intellectual sources of inspiration for this part of their research, however, which probably has to do with a difference in age. Sainte-Beuve belonged to the generation of August Comte, Hippolyte Taine, and John Stuart Mill, and he received the same deterministic Enlightenment thought that Comte and his followers would later systematize as positivism. In terms of literary scholarship specifically, Sainte-Beuve points out his admiration for the scholarship of Mme de Staël (*De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 1799) and Abel-François Villemain (*Cours de la littérature française*, 5 vols., 1828-1829). Mme de Staël and Villemain were instrumental in overcoming normative classicist rhetoric as the main academic literary subject in France, and in establishing literature as a historically relative object of research.⁶ Born an entire generation later, Scherer predominantly refers to the by then readily elaborated positivism of Comte, Taine, Mill, and Henry Thomas Buckle, but also to the work of Herder and Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt.⁷

Sainte-Beuve provides an explicit description of his 'méthode physiologique ou naturelle' in an 1862 essay on Chateaubriand. The precept of this approach is that a writer and his literary work form an analytical unity, and in order to understand a literary text, one needs to be intimately familiar with the author's personality.⁸ Sainte-Beuve attempts to explain the formation of literary personalities by three categories of determining factors: natural predispositions, education/intellectual socialization in a particular milieu, and historical (literary) context. His *portraits* consequently provide a detailed biographical account and a psychological characterization of the writers in question. The most important empirical source for this research is provided by private correspondence, diaries, and accounts of family and friends of the writer. The more intimate the source, the better. An ideal biography is 'un excellent volume ou le texte entier de cette vie si pleine est, en quelque sorte, établi'.⁹ Under the heading of natural predispositions, Sainte-Beuve discusses the influence of familial predisposition, climate, soil, and national character on a writer's character. Sainte-Beuve argues that to determine 'la race physiologique' of a writer is of utmost interest, while conceding that in most cases, the critic can do little more than speculate. Regarding the analysis of socialization, Sainte-Beuve points to the importance of the artistic/intellectual milieu in which a young writer's creativity is moulded. By historical context Sainte-Beuve means specific literary contingencies such as the status of a language as a means of poetic expression (variety of rhyme forms, vocabulary, etc.) at a certain point in history, as well as popular motifs, genres, and the influence of dominant writers, but also, very broadly, the moral zeitgeist of an epoch, i.e. social manners and conventions of the literate strata of society. The purpose is to re-imagine the writer's inner life as carefully as possible, so as to reach a point where the critic can actually predict how the writer would have acted in certain situations.¹⁰

Scherer is similarly concerned with the biographical depiction of the life of influential individuals of German literary and intellectual history, such as Goethe or Jacob Grimm. In the 1877 essay *Goethe-Philologie*, Scherer provides a programmatic outline of his approach. Scherer is convinced that the study of Goethe's life is particularly useful since it also serves the purpose of moral education and the strengthening of national identity. In order to understand the production of literature, the researcher should analytically relate the

6 J.-L. Diaz, 'Aller droit à l'auteur sous le masque du livre. Sainte-Beuve et le biographique', *Romantisme. Revue du dix-neuvième siècle* 30 (109) 45-67.

7 Höppner, *Das Ererbte* (n. 5) 23-24.

8 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux lundis* 5 (Paris 1872) 15.

9 Quoted from Diaz, 'Aller' (n. 6) 57.

10 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Œuvres* 1 (Paris 1949) 677.

respective ways in which a writer's natural predispositions, his upbringing and education, and his general experience in life shape his literary works.¹¹ Similar but not equivalent to Taine's terminology of *race*, *milieu*, *moment*, Scherer introduces the terminology of *Erebttes*, *Erlebtes*, *Erlerntes*. While biographism forms a major research interest of Sainte-Beuve, Scherer only published a comparatively small number of biographical works, and he never reached the same degree of methodological sophistication and self-reflection as Sainte-Beuve.

While both Scherer and Sainte-Beuve professed literary criticism and biography, they also pursued extensive research in domains that they did not share. A main research interest for Sainte-Beuve was actually the classification of individuals in psychological families or types ('familles d'esprit' or 'types morales'), for which the deterministic biographical accounts of the individual *portraits* served as a basis. In his major scholarly publication *Port-Royal* (1840-1848), Sainte-Beuve describes his endeavour most explicitly as that of writing a universal 'histoire naturelle morale' that classifies all men according to their moral character. Sainte-Beuve hopes that once the database of empirical material on the various character types is rich enough, it will be possible to quickly identify an individual by a single characteristic trait and predict which other traits this type is naturally endowed with.¹² Alternatively, Sainte-Beuve called his classification of individuals 'anatomie morale' and 'science morale', admitting that his interest in psychological classification frequently outweighs the interest in literature per se.¹³ As Sainte-Beuve's classificatory endeavour proceeds from the psychological characterization of individuals, the pool of relevant empirical sources for this kind of anthropological research is extended from the literary, private, and biographical documents pertaining to a single person to the historical totality of this kind of texts.

Major research interests for Scherer were linguistics and literary history. One of his earliest, yet highly influential works was *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1868), in which he traces the quasi-evolutionary development of syllable roots in German. The declared goal of this study is to relate the formation of language to an immutable, German national character.¹⁴ Scherer compares a wealth of historical empirical material on German syllable roots and attempts to explain their development from late antiquity to the present. Especially the comparative approach is similar to the one taken by Jacob Grimm in his influential work *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819). In contrast to Grimm, however, Scherer makes heavy use of insights into the physiology of sound (*Lautphysiologie*), especially the work of Ernst Brücke and Hermann von Helmholtz. Scherer argues that the characteristic rhythm of the German pronunciation is determined by certain (psycho-)physiological predispositions specific to German ethnicity, such as the passionate pursuit of ideals that was described as a characteristically German trait already by Tacitus.¹⁵

From 1870 on, Scherer puts a strong focus on literary history. He aims to combine 'lower' and 'higher' textual criticism, i.e. the strict philological method of the then dominant Berlin school, plus historically contextualized interpretation of literary texts. Mainly interested the editorial reconstruction of medieval literary texts, the Berlin school posed rather narrow research questions concerning the authorship, date, and location of origin of respective manuscripts. Scherer consciously extends the heuristic goals of philology. By attempting to provide causal explanation of literary history, Scherer hopes to counter the strong ideographic

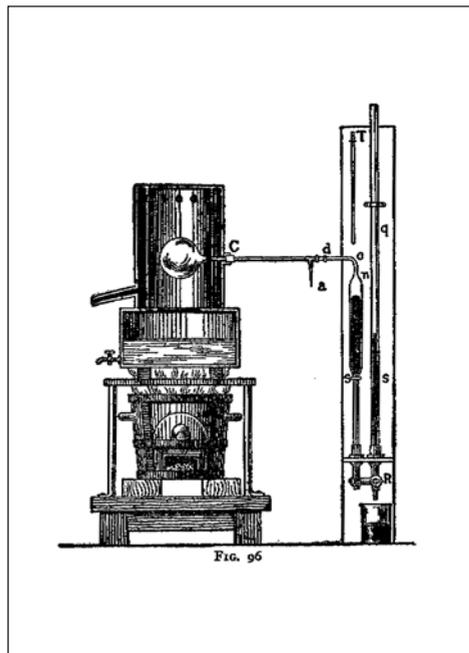
11 W. Scherer, *Aufsätze über Goethe* (Berlin 1874) 15.

12 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal* 1 (Paris 1926) 23.

13 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Premiers lundis. Début des portraits littéraires* 1 (Paris 1956) 653.

14 W. Scherer, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (Berlin 1868) ix.

15 Ibidem.



Left: An illustration from Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1754). Right: A diagram illustrating Helmholtz's principle of the conservation of energy in high pressure machines.

current in contemporary German historiography. In the famous *Geschichte der deutschen Litteratur* (1885 [1883]), Scherer traces the development of German literature from circa the sixth century until Goethe's death, describing the overall development as a succession of three literary peaks and declines. Scherer suggests that these peaks can be explained by the fortunate historical coincidence of several factors. These preconditions for literary bloom pertain to the domain of 'morals' (the general profession of religious and ethnic tolerance in German society), political opinions (the prevalence of a spirit of national unity over regional particularism), and the organization of society (the supremacy of worldly rulers over religious authorities; 'organic' harmony between aristocracy, middle and lower classes).¹⁶ Finally, Scherer tends to associate periods of economic bloom with decline in cultural matters. In contrast to his earlier linguistic research, Scherer's writings on literary history visibly background physiological determination of individual and historical processes, and concentrate rather on the societal factors relevant for the cultivation of the arts and national character.

Both Scherer's linguistic and historical research could be termed historical inductive. Scherer conceives hypotheses on the causal determination of linguistic and literary history by various driving forces, and then exemplifies these hypotheses on selected historical evidence.

What do the 'positivistic' research practices of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer thus have in common, and in which respects do they differ from each other? As I have already pointed out, both do share an interest in the deterministic explanation of the personality of writers on the

16 W. Scherer, *Geschichte der deutschen Litteratur* (Berlin 1885 [first edition 1883]) 469.

basis of a triad of determining factors, roughly natural predispositions, upbringing/education, and historical context. There are differences, however, in the emphasis Sainte-Beuve and Scherer put on deterministic biography, and in the roles deterministic biography played in their respective theoretical and methodological agendas. Sainte-Beuve was concerned *predominantly* with publishing biographical literary criticism, and he meant to use his biographical essays to build up a database of collected descriptions of human character types. Sainte-Beuve's research was essentially descriptive. In contrast, deterministic biography only forms one aspect of Scherer's work, next to his historical and linguistic research. Also, Scherer did not merely aim to describe writers and literary phenomena, but also to provide causal models to explain their becoming. In his linguistic as well as his historiographical writings he assumed that the development of German language and literature over the centuries is determined by the interplay of (psycho-)physiological, social, economic, political, and ethical factors. While the research of both Sainte-Beuve and Scherer is strongly normative insofar as it ventures a definition of individuals and the mechanisms by which they become what they supposedly are, Scherer is – in line with contemporary scientific *zeitgeist* – much more concerned with modelling the workings of the determining forces in action, projecting it into a potential future. Sainte-Beuve puts much greater effort in refining the analysis of individual character formation a posteriori. In the remainder of this paper, I will contextualize the differences in the work Sainte-Beuve and Scherer by relating them to different theoretical and methodological developments in natural scientific disciplines, which Sainte-Beuve and Scherer received and adapted to their own research goals.

A natural history of literature

Lepénies has pointed to the crucial importance of comparative natural history as a model for Sainte-Beuve's classification of literary character types.¹⁷ While recent research has dated the earliest concerted efforts at describing, comparing, and classifying botanical and zoological specimens back to the sixteenth century, the traditional view on the development of natural history used to credit the eighteenth century with the transition from an erudite philological study of ancient authorities to an empirical science that studied natural objects known by the researcher through personal experience.¹⁸ Sainte-Beuve adopted a perspective similar to this traditional view. Among the most popular works in the early nineteenth century were the *Histoire naturelle* (1749–1789) by Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and the *Species Plantarum* (1753) and the *Systema Naturae* (1735) by Carl von Linné. Sainte-Beuve dedicates several of his *causeries* to these researchers in the early 1850s, arguing that the differences in approach and style between them elicit the increasing differentiation of the science of nature as a distinct discipline.¹⁹ Buffon's 36-volume *Histoire naturelle* opens up a panoramic view on the biological and zoological phenomena known at the time. Buffon describes the origin and structure of the earth, as well as plants and animals, in short literary narratives, assuming that nature can best be explained by means of individual observation. Additionally, the *Histoire naturelle* contains illustrations of animal anatomy, thus encouraging further research on comparative anatomy. Buffon's view is careful, but deliberately unsystematic. Animals deemed more advanced in the hierarchy of creatures are granted more attention than 'inferior' ones. Stylistically, the aristocrat Buffon takes care to conform his descriptions to the

17 W. Lepénies, *Sainte-Beuve. Auf der Schwelle zur Moderne* (Munich 2000 [first edition 1997]) 466.

18 B. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing. Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (2006).

19 Lepénies, *Sainte-Beuve* (n. 17) 490.

precepts of classicist taste. This earned him the derisive verdict of being ‘*stylo primus doctrina ultimus*’ by later generations of more fully-fledged scientists. The work of Carl von Linné on the other hand represents in Sainte-Beuve’s opinion precisely such a model of science as an endeavour of specifically trained specialists. Linné does not only describe plants, animals, and minerals, but introduces a taxonomy that allows for their analytical classification in orders, genera and species. Natural phenomena are distinguished a priori on the basis of a few distinctive characteristics, such as the number of stamens and pistils in plants. Von Linné’s view is disinterested in the sense that it considers all natural phenomena equally relevant for taxonomic categorization. Sainte-Beuve draws a parallel between Linné’s concern with systematic description and his concisely constructed Latin syntax.²⁰ While Buffon describes randomly chosen parts of nature in a highly subjective, literary way, Linné attempts an exhaustive ordering of the natural cosmos in a logical system. Sainte-Beuve methodologically situates his own ‘natural history of literature’ somewhere between the approaches of Buffon and Linné. He appreciates the stylistic sophistication and the ‘moral’ concern in the works of Buffon, but he also aims for a strictly systematic comparison/classification of writers as in Linné.²¹

In his programmatic essay on Chateaubriand (1862), Sainte-Beuve similarly parallels the development of literary criticism to the one of botany and comparative anatomy as he perceived it. Contemporary literary criticism as field of research, Sainte-Beuve argues, is still in a rather primitive state, comparable to that of botany and comparative anatomy before Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu (1748-1836) and Georges Cuvier (1769-1832). Jussieu’s influential *Genera Plantarum*, published in 1789, provided the first widely accepted natural arrangement of all plants.²² In contrast to Linné’s taxonomic focus on the sexual organs of species, Jussieu took into account a wider range of morphological characteristics. His system was meant to describe the actual parental relationship between species, rather than merely ordering them according to an artificial, pre-conceived system. In the same vein, Cuvier elaborated an influential systematic description of zoological species in his *Tableau élémentaire de l’histoire naturelle des animaux*. This classification is based on extensive comparative study of the anatomy of living and fossil animals, thus making a manifold of morphological differences the basis of distinction between ‘natural’ groupings of organisms. Sainte-Beuve considers French literary criticism in 1862 to be still in the slightly less advanced stage of tentative comparison of individual writers, and first speculation about which of them might be subsumed under common literary families. In so doing, Sainte-Beuve hopes to lay the groundwork for more sophisticated scientific research, that one day will provide a complete classification of the different literary character types.

Our study of human nature is still at the data-gathering stage; at best, we have descriptions of individuals and a of a few types [...] However, a day will come – I believe I have discerned its coming in the course of my observations – when a science of human nature will be constituted, and the great orders and species of minds will be sorted out. Then, on the basis of a mind’s principal characteristics, it will be possible to deduce several others. No doubt it will never be possible to achieve in the case of man what can be achieved in the case of animals and plants: human nature is more complex. It possess what is called ‘freedom’, and

20 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi* 10 (Paris 1855) 48.

21 Ibidem, 54.

22 P.F. Stevens, ‘Thinking of Biology. How to interpret botanical classifications – suggestions from history’, *BioScience* 47 (1997) 243-250.

this always presupposes a great mobility of possible combinations. However that may be, I imagine that eventually the science of the moralist will be constituted on a broader foundation; today it is at the stage where botany was before Jussieu and comparative anatomy before Cuvier – it is still anecdotal, as it were. What we achieve is mere monographs, detailed observations; yet I sense the presence of connections and relationships; and a more comprehensive, more luminous understanding, with a sharp eye for detail, will one day be able to discover the great natural divisions in which the various families of minds belong.²³

Sainte-Beuve hoped that the database of human character types to which his critical essays amounted in their totality would be used as an empirical foundation for a future science of morals. The very term ‘science morale’ of course implies a strong political motivation. Throughout his life, Sainte-Beuve was concerned with ideas of social equality and political participation of the lower and middle classes. Circa 1830, he published a series of essays expressing his enthusiasm for the early socialist ideology of Saint-Simon. He distanced himself from Saint-Simonism several months later, however, when he felt that the religious traits of the movement had outweighed its original proto-social scientific attitude.²⁴ Interestingly, while the young Sainte-Beuve had under the influence of Saint-Simon compared society to a natural organism, the mature Sainte-Beuve referred to society as a ‘belle chose artificielle’ in his 1865 biography of the controversial left-wing activist Pierre Joseph Proudhon.²⁵ While Sainte-Beuve expressed strong sympathy for Proudhon’s socialist engagement and autodidactic intellectual achievements, he also opposed his radically mechanistic conception of society as exposed in the works *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?* (1841) and *Système des contradictions économiques ou philosophie de la misère* (1846), which in his view corresponded to Proudhon’s revolutionary radicalism. The ‘metaphysical algebra’ Proudhon hoped to develop should ultimately permit to discover immutable principles that govern social life like the laws of gravity govern physical processes. Sainte-Beuve, however, was convinced that Proudhon overrated the analytical performance of mechanic models of society, because it neglected the historically developed complexity of social interaction.²⁶ The strongly descriptive model of research that Sainte-Beuve adopted from the comparative natural sciences was particularly meaningful in such a view on the sociopolitical context. Rather than revolutionary experiments, the very fragility of society as a precious fragile artifact demanded in Sainte-Beuve’s opinion a solid base of empirical knowledge on social life and the human mind, if one was to implement effective and durable social reform.

An empirical inductive approach to literature

In the foreword to the first edition of *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1868), Scherer explicitly sets his causalistic approach to literary history apart from the powerful ideographic current in German historiography and Goethe-biographism. Research should make a transition from merely collecting data to uncovering the causal forces determining historical processes.

23 Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux lundis* (n. 8) 16-17. Translation from: C.-A Sainte-Beuve, *Selected Essays*, Trans. F. Steegmüller & N. Guterman (London 1965).

24 Lepenies, *Sainte-Beuve* (n. 17) 193 et seqq.

25 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *P.J. Proudhon, sa vie et sa correspondance* (Paris 1875 [first edition 1838]), 38.

26 *Ibidem*, 342.

Literary Positivism?

We are, at long last, tired of considering the mindless accumulation of well-documented material as the ultimate triumph of research. We no longer believe the sophistic argument that there is a specific method to historical reflection, which does “not explain, but comprehend”. Goethe’s autobiography as a causal explanation of genius on the one hand, and political economy as a sort of ‘Volkswirtschaftslehre’ that follows a historical-physiological method on the other hand, both indicate the direction we should pursue for world history generally. For we believe with Buckle that determinism, the democratic dogma of unfree will, this central tenet of protestantism, is the cornerstone of all true understanding of History. We believe with Buckle that the goals of historical science are essentially cognate with the natural sciences, insofar as we seek knowledge of the mental powers in order to dominate them, just as the natural sciences permit to compel the physical forces into human service.²⁷

Next to his explicit mentioning of Henry Thomas Buckle, Goethe’s autobiography, and national economy, German physical reductionism figures prominently in this methodological reflection. It is well known that the hugely successful work of Hermann von Helmholtz and Emil Du Bois-Reymond had made the physical category of force (*Kraft*) a powerful metaphor in the political discourse of German imperialism.²⁸ The formulation of the *Energieerhaltungssatz* through Helmholtz in 1847 spawned a way of thinking in which society as a whole was imagined as a steam engine, whose performance could be optimized after the relation of its driving forces were causally explained. The *Kraft* discourse and the concern with entropy that sprung from this powerful technological metaphor is intimately related to the emergence of national economy as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century. National economy aimed to describe and causally explain the material, social, and cultural factors determining the inner workings of the economic system, in order to provide a resource for policymakers. Sternsdorff located an unpublished one-page manuscript among Scherer’s papers (dated approximately 1866-1870), which explicitly draws a parallel between Helmholtz’ *Energieerhaltungssatz* and the conservation of the ‘moral’ forces of a nation.²⁹ Scherer’s argument implies that the convenient and careless life of the Austrian bourgeoisie causes a weakening of national spirit (*‘nationales Volksgefühl’*), paralleling the physical effect of entropy.

Scherer furthermore aligned his research rhetorically with Darwinism, which was being enthusiastically received in Germany at that time. In the second edition of *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1868), Scherer stresses the parallel between Darwin’s evolutionary principle and the comparative analysis of the development of syllable roots in the German language. Scherer compares the struggle for survival among species to the survival of the fittest syllable roots: ‘Auch zwischen den Wörtern herrscht [sic] ein Kampf ums Dasein’.³⁰

By pointing to similarities between Darwinism and philological approaches, Scherer pursues a larger strategy. He aims to provide an alternative genealogical account of the development of philological methodology to historically justify his own recent adoption of the empirical inductive approach. In the *Geschichte der deutschen Litteratur* Scherer fiercely attacks Romantic *Naturphilosophie*. The idealistic fashion of deductively constructed systems and the disregard for empirical evidence are in Scherer’s view responsible for the stagnation in humanistic and scientific research in Germany in the first two decades of the nineteenth

27 Scherer, *Zur Geschichte* (n. 14) viii-ix [my translation].

28 A. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor. Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley 1990) 133.

29 Sternsdorff, *Wissenschaftskonstitution* (n. 4) 133.

30 W. Michler, ‘An den Siegeswagen gefesselt. Wissenschaft and Nation bei Wilhelm Scherer’, in: K. Amann & K. Wagner (eds.), *Literatur and Nation. Die Gründung des Deutschen Reiches 1871 in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Cologne 1996) 233-266, especially 243.

century. Scherer points out that the constitutive philological subdiscipline of linguistics in contrast had never abandoned the materialistic spirit of the Newtonian age, especially in terms of the comparative method that could equally be found in comparative natural sciences. The idea of a quasi-evolutionary development of language was indeed part of a longstanding linguistic tradition established by researchers such as Jacob Grimm, Friedrich Schlegel, and Franz Bopp. Schlegel, for example, had attempted to study the relation between the various Aryan languages through comparison, in the hope of proving their common origin in an Aryan Ur-language. Schlegel, Grimm, and Bopp had in turn found methodological models for their work in comparative physiology and especially in the comparative zoology of Georges Cuvier.³¹ German scholars of nature on the other hand, Scherer continues, had adopted idealistic concepts from the successful philosophy of Hegel in the early nineteenth century, and it was only through the success of German reductionism in the 1840s that they were forced back to the principle of empirical inductive research. Scherer claimed on the basis of this account that philology was by virtue of its methodological ancestry more 'scientific' than the work of many older German scientists who had been trained in the spirit of *Naturphilosophie*.

Most German scholars of nature let themselves be seduced by the poets and metaphysicians to over-hastily build systems. Believing in pretty words, they fled the school of Newton and of eighteenth century mathematical education. German philologists, linguists and historians meanwhile held on to the best scientific achievements of the eighteenth century. Thus they laid the foundation for a new, more cautious and just criticism, enriching and refining those achievements further. In the human sciences, even the metaphysical tendency to create a larger synthetic picture while not yet knowing its constitutive parts served as a training in the comparative method. It is this comparative method that recurrently elevated to the rank of firm knowledge what once appeared as a vague dream.³²

Scherer's historical inductive epistemology is built on normative, politically relevant assumptions. Scherer was at all times eager to make bold claims about the determination of linguistic and literary history by a range of driving forces. We can observe, however, a shift of epistemic emphasis from physiological determination to societal determination (i.e. attention to political, social, economic, and 'moral' factors preparing periods of literary bloom) as the main analytical category. In the pre-1871 period, the idea of a physiological essence of German ethnicity that Scherer furthers in his linguistic research clearly serves to 'scientifically' justify the process of political unification of the particularized German states. Scherer had from his student years been a convinced liberal, and an adherent to the idea of a united German nation with a liberal constitution. Early on, he came to despise the clerical and repressive climate of the Austrian empire. Instead he expressed his sympathy for the more progressive image of Protestant Prussia, Austria's main competitor for political hegemony. Scherer was enthusiastic about Prussia's victory at Königgrätz in 1866, and much more so about the proclamation of the German empire in Versailles in 1871. In reward for his scholarly achievements just as much as for his nationalistic engagement, Scherer was in 1877 appointed the first full professor of modern German literature at the University of Berlin.³³

³¹ Ibidem, 241.

³² W. Scherer, *Kleine Schriften zur altdeutschen Philologie* (Berlin 1893) 8 [my translation].

³³ P.C. Bontempelli, *Knowledge, Power, and Discipline. German Studies and National Identity* (Minneapolis/London 2004) 56.

research provides a potential knowledge resource for an active cultural policy, biased of course by his own bourgeois political opinions.

A short review on the mechanisms of reception

While the main aim of this paper is a comparison of the intellectual content and scientific influences of the work of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer, in this chapter I will provide a general theoretical framework to suggest reasons for their negative posthumous reception. The violent dismissal of the once highly influential research programs of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer should be seen in the context of the social history of sciences and literature in Europe in the nineteenth century. Influential sociological theorists suggest that both fields established themselves as autonomous societal domains in this period. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann describes the development of modern society since circa 1800 as the emergence of a complex array of inter-related sub-systems, such as politics, journalism, the judiciary system, and also art and science.³⁵ These systems are constituted by communication, which is in turn channelled according to a binary code, e.g. beauty/non beauty for art, and truth/untruth for science. By sorting out communicative elements that do not fit the positive semantic pole of these dichotomies, systems distinguish themselves from encompassing society. Thus, in the early nineteenth century, the criteria for what counts as scientific and artistic were constituted, and allowed for science and art to actually establish themselves in an institutionalized shape. While most Europeans of say, the fifteenth century, would probably have considered beauty and truth to inevitably coincide, those two concepts have the past two hundred years crystallized into dichotomies of their own. Art and science have come to figure as cultural antipodes.

Pierre Bourdieu equally proposes a view of society since circa 1800 as consisting of a manifold of differentiating sub-fields, e.g. science, art, education, politics, etc.³⁶ A field is defined as a set of social relations between individual actors competing in the accumulation of different sorts of both material (e.g. money, connections) and immaterial capital (e.g. original new ways to solve a scientific problem). Actors occupying different positions in the field are likely to dispose of different sorts of capital, striving to reaffirm or overthrow the established elite. Each field provides an individual framework determining what counts as a particular form of capital in that context. Around circa the middle of the nineteenth century, the fields of art and science established relatively stable criteria for viable cultural capital, thus providing the precondition for autonomization. Again, the standards of cultural capital in these two fields are largely antinomic, with virtues such as objectivity and exactitude counting for desirable attributes of scientific activity, while utmost dedication to original creation (art for the sake of art) came to be the distinctive mark of artistic personality.

The unfavourable posthumous reception of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer can against this background be explained as a result of the differentiation of societal domains that increasingly drove artistic, scholarly, and scientific writing apart from each other. In this process, sleight-of-hand oppositions such as positivism >< hermeneutics came in handy, since they allowed for and furthered demarcation of social identities. It will of course not come as a surprise that territorial conflicts like those between different disciplinary stakeholders have a tendency to reify the competing research programs. A most notable example for this mechanism is the

35 N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main 1984).

36 P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Trans. R. Johnson (New York 1993).

infamous 'two cultures debate' initiated by C.P. Snow's lecture of 1959. The controversy that sprung from the publication of Snow's essay caused many influential individuals with humanistic and/or scientific degrees to point out what they consider characteristic about their profession.³⁷ Many respective arguments actually abuse the term culture. Rather than considering research goals and methods as historically constructed, they imply that the very objects of study, i.e. literary texts and the totality of natural phenomena, impose distinctive epistemological mindsets on those who venture to study them.³⁸ Scholars of literature are thus by virtue of intrinsic qualities of the texts they investigate led to construe reality in general as a profoundly relative phenomenon, from which it is impossible to draw universally valid conclusions. Scientists, on the other hand, are suggested to be prone to overly optimistic assumptions about the possibility to logically formalize natural processes. Note that the 'cultural' opposition of 'scientific' or 'positivistic' approaches on the one hand, and of hermeneutic or interpretative ones on the other can be found also within the domain of literary studies itself. In Bourdieu's view, modern literary studies pertain to the social sub-fields of academia and science, but they are characterized by a peculiar ambiguity when compared to the natural sciences. On the one hand, literary scholars have traditionally had the societal function to conserve and transmit canonical knowledge about a nation's literature. On the other hand, they have been expected to produce original new knowledge that potentially contrasts with the canon.³⁹ Literary studies are thus subject to an inherent tension between causalistic, scientific approaches and the production of more ideographic, conservatory knowledge, mirroring on a micro level the tension between art and the sciences in general.

The dust of nineteenth and twentieth century 'two cultures debates' having settled, however, the work of Sainte-Beuve and Scherer has since recently received renewed attention. Since about a decade we can observe a small-scale renaissance of scholarship on Sainte-Beuve, e.g. in the shape of a doctoral dissertation (Verona 1999) and a special issue of the historical literary journal *Romantisme*.⁴⁰ The study of Lepenies cited above has re-evaluated Sainte-Beuve's literary criticism as a careful and not at all 'scientific' effort to cope with the mixed blessings of modernity. The relatively recent work on Scherer by Sternsdorff (1979) and Höppner (1993) similarly has attempted to correct the one-sided reception of Scherer as a 'positivist' by emphasizing the more classical hermeneutic elements in his work.⁴¹ Höppner has furthermore pointed out parallels between Scherer's work and the contemporary empirical turn in literary studies, and also Scherer's pioneering role for reception studies generally.

Conclusion

In this paper I compared the literary scholarship of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve and Wilhelm Scherer, two prime representatives of what is traditionally referred to as literary positivism. Both scholars shared an interest in deterministic biography. Attributing the inspiration for this part of their work to a large number of different sources (Mme de Staël, Abel-François Villemain, Henry Thomas Buckle, John Stuart Mill, Comte, Taine, Herder and the Humboldts), Sainte-Beuve and Scherer both developed a theoretical framework that

37 Cf. F.R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow* (London 1962).

38 D. Cordle, *Postmodern postures: literature, science and the two cultures debate* (Aldershot 1999) 30 et seqq.

39 P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* [translated by Peter Collier] (Cambridge 1990 [first French edition 1984]) 74.

40 R. Verona, *Les Salons de Sainte-Beuve* (Paris 1999); *Romantisme. Revue du dix-neuvième siècle* 109 (2000).

41 Sternsdorff, *Wissenschaftskonstitution* (n. 4) 1979; Höppner, *Das Ererbte* (n. 5).

allowed them to explain the creation of literary works by a predetermined set of determining factors, such as natural predispositions, upbringing/education, and historical context. The comparison between Sainte-Beuve and Scherer, however, also yielded noteworthy differences in terms of other research questions, as well as underlying theoretical concepts and methods. I argued that these differences can be explained by different contexts of scientific development in France and Germany in the nineteenth century, and also by the different sociopolitical purposes both scholars pursued in their research.

Sainte-Beuve's larger vision of a database of human character types is strongly informed by his reception of the comparative natural sciences, especially late eighteenth/early nineteenth century botany and zoology. His dispersed methodological reflections frequently refer to the recent history of science, which he describes as the successful progress from early narrative accounts of natural history to the formulation of biological taxonomy and the identification of natural zoological/botanical species. The individuals who formally represent this chronological development are Buffon, Linné, Jussieu and Cuvier. Sainte-Beuve situates his own comparative literary criticism between Linné and Jussieu/Cuvier, i.e. at the stage between comparative data collection and first attempts to classify the different 'familles naturelles d'esprit'. The horizon of analogies between Sainte-Beuve's comparative literary criticism and the natural sciences ends with his acknowledgement of the work of Jussieu and Cuvier.

Scherer's research is in many respects conceived as a humanistic equivalent to the empirical inductive research model. In many of his writings, he explicitly distinguishes between the collection and review of relevant empirical material on the one hand, and the formulation of causal hypothesis to explain this material on the other. Scherer referred to German physical reductionism (Hermann von Helmholtz) as a model for his causalistic historiography. Just like Helmholtz and his colleagues translated the natural cosmos into a reservoir of potentially controllable forces, Scherer meant to uncover driving forces of linguistic and literary history in order to provide a knowledge resource for an active cultural policy.

It might in the first place seem surprising that Sainte-Beuve and Scherer differed in age by thirty-five years and still came to be considered the most important representatives of 'literary positivism' by posterity, thus implying a certain equivalence of their research. This discrepancy can be related to the overall development of science in France and Germany. While the French comparative disciplines dominated European science in the first half of the nineteenth century, Germany took the lead after the success of the physical reductionism of Helmholtz and Du Bois-Reymond in the 1840s. Sainte-Beuve and Scherer received and implemented scientific influences when the respective disciplines were at the height of their popularity in their countries.

Next to that, it is important to keep in mind the specific significance that Sainte-Beuve's comparative approach and Scherer's historical inductive method acquired in their respective sociopolitical contexts. Sainte-Beuve's conception of a descriptive 'science of morals' based on the study of literary texts was societally meaningful in a period of rapidly shifting political regimes after 1789, and of the ever more urgent 'question sociale'. By conducting descriptive 'anthropological' research on human character types, Sainte-Beuve hoped to facilitate the careful implementation of durable social reform, and to prevent revolutionary turmoil.

The young Scherer, on the other hand, felt the urge to take political action in a more immediate way. During the political struggle for unification of the particularized German states, his linguistic research was meant to support Prussia by making bold inductive claims

about the (psycho-)physiological foundation of German national character, even though such claims could not be proven empirically. After the proclamation of the German empire in 1871, however, Scherer became disappointed with the general imperialistic and anti-semitic turn of German nationalism. As a reaction, he henceforth omitted questions regarding the physiological determination of national character. In his historiographical writings, he rather used the deterministic principle to uncover the social, economic, political, and ethical driving forces that enable peaks in literary history, thus drawing attention to the active social construction of national character.

What does this analysis of a central aspect of nineteenth century literary criticism imply for literary studies and humanistic methodology today? It is first of all an encouragement to read Sainte-Beuve and Scherer without condemning them for trying to apply 'scientific' methods to the polymorphous phenomenon that is literature. The term 'scientific' is far from unequivocally denoting a specific method, and its common reductive usage in the humanities is the historical product of disciplinary differentiation. The gain of such a reflection does certainly not lie in assessing the validity of the truth-claims raised by Sainte-Beuve and Scherer. However, apart from asking 'is what they asserted true', a question worth posing is 'is it (at least partially) interesting?'. I would argue that the differences between nineteenth century and contemporary approaches to literature create a productive awareness of the genealogical development of humanistic methods. What makes Sainte-Beuve and Scherer peculiar phenomena when seen from a modern perspective is not so much their exaggerated belief in the empirical evidence of their research, but the degree to which they dared to apply *explicit* methods and analytical categories to literature. Artificial analytical categories such as 'work', 'individual', 'author' are still being used in the everyday practice of literary studies today. In spite of radically reflexive approaches inspired by post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminism, however, they are often tacitly taken for universal facts of literary production. Generally, literary studies is a discipline that remains remarkably implicit about its methods and goals, very often for fear of doing injustice to the object of study. This too often results in an ideographic compromise that contents itself with overly cautious commentary of literary texts and the tacit continuation of established critical traditions. Conscious use of categories is not the same as assuming their natural 'givenness'; rather, the consistent application of clearly defined methods and analytical categories can point to their limitations and thus tell us something *ex negativo* about what we call 'literature' in a deceptively self-explanatory way.

SUMMARY

Literary positivism? Scientific theories and methods in the work of sainte-beuve (1804-1869) and wilhelm scherer (1841-1886)

This paper compares the research and critical work of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve and Wilhelm Scherer, two of the most important representatives of 'literary positivism' in France and the Germanophone countries in the nineteenth century. It argues that although Sainte-Beuve and Scherer shared a research interest in deterministic biography, their work is too rich and too varied to lump it together under the commonly assigned label of 'positivism'. Sainte-Beuve's descriptive comparative literary criticism was meant to establish a database of human

character types and thereby lay the groundwork for a future science of morals. Scherer, on the other hand, was mainly interested elaborating inductive hypotheses on the causal determination of individual life and literary history by various social and physiological factors. The paper elicits the different scientific sources of knowledge that Sainte-Beuve and Scherer drew upon. While Sainte-Beuve's classification of character types is strongly informed by his reception of the comparative natural sciences, especially late eighteenth/early nineteenth century botany and zoology, Scherer's research is in many respects conceived as a humanistic equivalent to the empirical inductive research model of German physical reductionism. Finally, the paper elucidates the specific political contexts to which Sainte-Beuve and Scherer reacted in their research.